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# **The Future of United States Policy in Colombia for the Inter-American Dialogue**

**By  
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[The following are excerpts of the remarks as prepared for the Inter-American Dialogue, Washington, D.C., August 3, 2005.]

This is my first time addressing the Inter-American Dialogue in my capacity as Under Secretary for Political Affairs at the U.S. Department of State. I appreciate your interest in the region and am interested in hearing your views. We have no better partner in Latin America. Our partnership with Colombia helps advance U.S. interests and defend our shared values. President Uribe is one of our strongest allies, and U.S. support, including strong bipartisan support from the Congress, has been an integral part of our shared success with Colombia. It has enabled the Uribe government to continue to make great strides against narcotraffickers and terrorists, to strengthen Colombia's democracy and to improve the day-to-day lives of Colombia's citizens.

## **Democratic Security**

President Alvaro Uribe is one of a new generation of leaders that include Lagos in Chile, Vazquez in Uruguay, and Lula in Brazil. President Uribe is transforming Colombia by energetically pursuing his vision of a strongly democratic Colombia free from violence, drugs and corruption. In a nation afflicted by over four decades of violence, the Uribe administration has achieved impressive progress on all fronts. In the three years since Uribe came into office, Colombia's security forces have carried out an intensive nationwide campaign against illegal armed groups, and reestablished the government's presence in every one of the country's municipalities, a first in modern Colombian history. Violent crime is at the lowest level in over sixteen years. There has been a sharp decrease in murders, kidnappings and other violent crimes, as well as coca and opium poppy cultivation. The result is a Colombia where its citizens are now able to travel the roads without the constant fear of being kidnapped or killed.

## **Economy and the Free Trade Agreement**

Improved security has produced economic opportunity. Economic opportunity, in turn, empowers the Colombian government and society to expand the areas governed by the rule-of-law. President Uribe's Democratic Security Strategy also had results on the economic front last year:

- The Colombian economy continued its recovery in 2004. Gross domestic product (GDP) growth was approximately 4 percent;
- International monetary fund (IMF) targets for the budget deficit, inflation, and reserves were either met or exceeded;
- Exports and imports increased by over 15 percent;
- Foreign direct investment increased by over 70 percent;
- Though still in double digits, unemployment continues to decline.

These figures are impressive, especially if one considers that this is a nation plagued by four decades of violence. This strong economic track record is a major reason why the U.S. decided to enter into free trade talks with Colombia, along with Peru and Ecuador. Those negotiations are at an advanced stage. U.S. and Colombian agricultural negotiations will resume here next week. Agriculture remains a key difference in the current negotiations. When finalized, this free trade agreement will help solidify the gains of the past years and lead to a long-term growth and development path for Colombia. We are confident that this Free Trade Agreement (FTA) will produce dividends for Colombia well in excess of the benefits currently enjoyed under the *Andean Trade Preference and Drug Eradication Act* (ATPDEA). At the same time, this agreement will open new opportunities for U.S. exporters and investors.

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## **Counternarcotics**

Turning to counternarcotics, we see a number of indicators of a successful strategy. Drug crop eradication, narcotics interdiction, and related arrests are at record-high levels. Our work with the Colombian government has reduced coca cultivation by 33 percent since 2001 and poppy cultivation by 65 percent.

Colombia still faces a wide variety of challenges. Despite dramatic progress against the narcotics trade, Colombia remains a major producing and transshipment country. Over 90 percent of the cocaine and 50 percent of the heroin entering the U.S. comes from Colombia. It is also a leading user of precursor chemicals and the focus of significant money laundering activity. The normal problems associated with narcotrafficking are compounded in Colombia by the presence of various armed groups that are at war with the government and each other. The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the United Self Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), and the National Liberation Army (ELN) are all involved in narcoterrorism. These groups operate in areas where coca and opium poppy cultivation is concentrated. Their involvement in narcotics is a major cause of violence and terrorism in Colombia and a source of funds for the armed groups.

## **Demobilization & the Justice and Peace Law**

Terrorism in Colombia supports and draws resources from the narcotics industry, kidnapping, and extortion. The Colombian government's peace processes with the illegal armed groups are critical to sustained success. An ambitious demobilization effort has already removed over 8,000 paramilitaries from combat since 2003, and many more demobilizations are planned for this year.

On July 22, President Uribe signed into law a legal framework to govern the demobilization of illegal armed groups. The legislation is the result of more than two years of transparent, democratic debate. Colombia's Justice and Peace Law establishes a mechanism that, if implemented vigorously, will help dismantle the criminal structures of demobilized illegal armed groups, provide for peace with justice and permit continued extradition.

Some have argued that the law is not tough enough on members of paramilitary forces. Ultimately, however, the balance between peace and justice is a decision for Colombians to make for themselves. The task before the Colombian government with a little help from its friends is to make it work. I believe it is in the United States' interest to join with our Colombian partners in that effort. But, the Colombian government must implement this law aggressively and with strength of purpose to put the worst of the para-militaries behind bars.

## **Human Rights**

The human rights situation remains an important focus of our Colombia policy. On Monday, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice determined and certified to Congress that the Colombian Government and Armed Forces are meeting statutory criteria related to human rights and severing ties to paramilitary groups. I briefed the Secretary on my trip and my meetings with President Uribe, key members of his cabinet, including the new Defense Minister and Attorney General, as well as non-government organizations concerned about human rights. I told her that I had received the personal assurances of the Colombian leadership on human rights and their commitment to expedite the most critical cases of human rights abuses. Based on those undertakings and my assessment of the new cabinet members, there was a unanimous recommendation that she make the certification. We recognize that more needs to be done to improve the human rights performance of the Armed Forces. The decision was not easy.

The July 13 recent announcement of indictments in the Arauca case is encouraging, as is the levying of charges against two generals and two colonels by the Inspector General for incidents occurring in San José de Apartadó in 2000-2002. Additionally, Colombian authorities changed the venue for the Mapiripán case (at our urging), and a forty-year sentence is being sought by the prosecution for retired General Uscátegui pending a final verdict.

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Colombia has come a long way since 1997, when the Leahy amendment was enacted. Then, when we vetted Colombia's military units, we determined none of those units were eligible for security assistance. Now, over 100 Colombian units are operating without any credible allegations of gross human rights violations and are therefore eligible to receive U.S. security assistance. We made a policy decision to not provide assistance to the 17th Brigade until it deals with the numerous allegations of human rights abuses that have been made against it. At any point we become aware of allegations against Colombian units, those allegations are investigated promptly. We believe that the ongoing U.S. role in vetting and training units of the Colombian military is a positive factor in improving the Colombian military's human rights performance. Again in this area, Colombia must pursue protection of human rights abuses with greater vigor and speed.

### **Future of U.S. Support**

My meetings with the Colombian leadership focused not just on the current relations between our countries, but also on the future of our relationship. Secretary of State Rice, speaking in Bogot April 27, 2005, said it very clearly, "You do not stop in midstream on something that has been very effective." Future U.S. assistance will build on the success Colombians have achieved with our support. We support a follow-on to Plan Colombia.

The Colombian government also recognizes the importance of continuing progress against counternarcotics and counterterrorism, intensifying its efforts to address the deeper causes of Colombian problems while gradually reducing its dependence on outside assistance. The Colombian government is also striving to enhance regional cooperation, both with its neighbors in Latin America and other interested governments in Europe and Asia. These Colombian government efforts will help ensure a continued strong basis of understanding and support within the U.S. Congress.

At the same time, our two countries will remain alert for possible areas of cooperation outside of Colombia's borders, both in the region and internationally. For example, Ambassador Luis Alberto Moreno's election as president of the Inter-American Development Bank will allow us to work together closely on improving the bank's effectiveness in meeting the region's challenges.

At the risk of having appeared too positive, I ask you to consider two questions:

- What are the realistic alternatives?
- What country in Latin America has shown more solid progress?

Alvaro Uribe has transformed Colombia. The discussions and policy differences we are now having are the result of success and our desire to build on that success. The most important phenomenon I encountered in Bogot is the new sense of optimism that Colombians feel as they debate their future and move forward.